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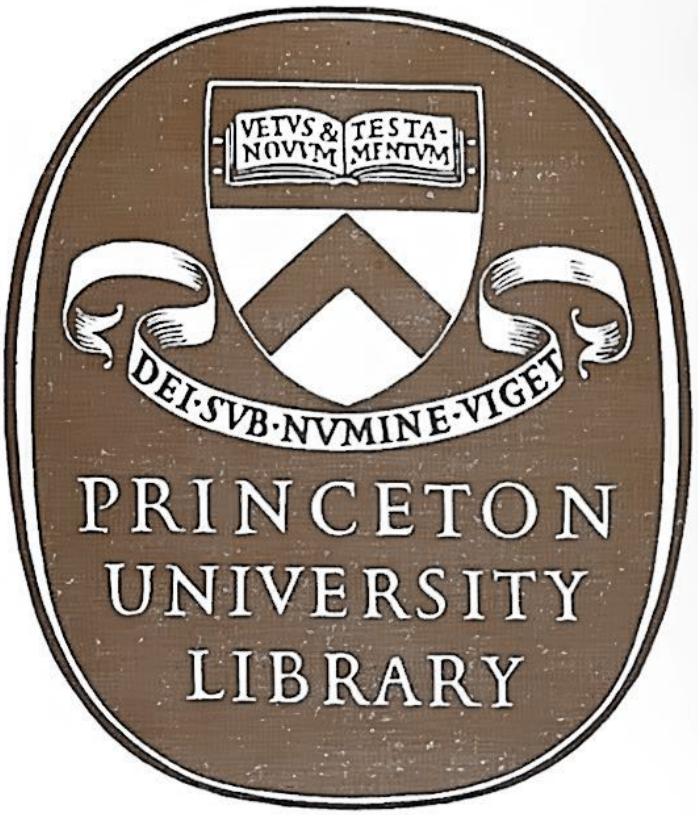
MAGGIE NELSON & CYNTHIA NELSON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NOT SISTERS

Not Sisters

Maggie Nelson and Cynthia Nelson

Soft Skull Press No. 17

(RECAP)
PS3564
.E469N68
1996s

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Soft Skull Press

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Maggie Nelson

Motel Story

We were in the middle of something big.
The United States, for example. I
was in a new bed in a new room. We
had a key, something to misplace and find.
All night we had heard a banging next door,
of intimacy or imprisonment.
You coughed and I ripped psalms from the Bible.
We bled all over. The blood did not move
far. It clung to the drain, towels, tissues.
In the morning I watched you in the lot
pulling a suitcase from the trunk, half-dressed.
In my dream we stay alive. In my dream
we stay together. Outside in the lot
your half-dressed flesh moves like weather.

Sisters

The sister, with lips like two blooded slabs of moon.
The white skid mark on the floor where we once breasted
together. She taught the torture of the pituitary. She
taught how to bleat into forms subterranean and proud.

She had seen the crevice and come back, with secrets of
pornography and the open road. She was everyone's
desire to know the eclipse, personally.

The house was like the aquarium but colder. Like the
circus but gorier. Mother lived with the premonition of
menopause. It made her feel like less of a woman.
Stepfather collected power tools and used Binaca. Father
sank into slivers of bone and ash on the mantle. Together
we lived in that adolescent slit.

The sister was the blonde epitome of the black eye. Those
white barley locks. She did not flinch from footage of the
fist in her face, the elaborate breakings of her back.

Her mouth was a landfill of lies, a rude cabaret of stories.
But to share the air with her! To feed on her
amphetamine dreams! Tales of wasted embryos, the
dislocated jaws of their fathers, the demise of the Sex
Pistols. Our language wore stiletto heels and fumbled
into First Lady positions.

Imagine, then, my own moment of lost innocence. The
sister was there, that impossible heroine: liquid, hot,

toxic. Yes, when the floral print peeled off. Yes, when I shed a tear for wildness. She had taught me to look for evidence that we were more than holes. So the pleasure, in the end, was my own.

October

Subway smells human today
hot, infectious. Collapsed
flesh and debris steam up

to the street and make me frown.
I am afraid of it, and of winter,
and of getting into bed with beautiful

strangers. This is the October
in which I was to dance my heart
make a mark. No snows. No needles.

No pills to kill. I was to be
unabashed, speeding out of danger.
Now I am screaming back to prayer.

I take my needle dry. Fear travels
like fire along capillaries so young,
so raw and clean, they beg disaster.

Tendons turn out to be unhealed
after all these years, just hung up
wrong, meat in a window, unattended.

I dream an angel who smells of garlic
and comes to me to cure fevers,
asks nothing of me, feeds me luck.

Your teenage years

Your high school sweetie had
brown bangs and acne.
She was an infection, but curable
and fair. She was unique,
without wind, without leaks.

She abducted you into adulthood
in her parents' room. It was
a shot in the dark, an innocent stab.
Nothing you had designs on.
Not the moon, not college.

Your stupidity is enviable
and perhaps a liberty. I would have
liked to have seen it in your face,
a worm in your adult features,
otherwise so separate and intact.

Letters from C.L.N.

I had a hellish toll-line on my way
home from LaGuardia that day.
All that clutching is hard on my bad knee.
There's two thousand miles between you and me.

Doesn't it feel spooky now
to think of how we ran around?
The new Gorilla Lounge
is superior to the old one,

but it has no heat. Two
weeks into Prozac and sleep
I'm losing to the dogs. My sister
calls it "the trendy drug."

I was under the impression I was served decaf.
I'm really into the word "temperance."
I wrapped a book for my father
in a map of Nevada. The lines looked nice.

I still want you in tile, in leather,
in jewels. I still want to buy
a flash camera, so when you come back
I can shoot you in the dark.

Portrait

You wanted
a garden

a view of a steeple
a slender liver

California shadows
eyes with beams

You have
a pocketful of vitamins

one silver coin for the 24 hours
in which you once remained clean

and the new book by the Pope:
Crossing the Threshold of Hope

You hold a power which is
illusory and huge. It scares me

to death as all dreams do
Wake from or into it with a howl

a sob, or by god, respect. Yes
you can truly get through anything,

catch the pitch from the mound
of the vacant, reveal the face of god

as substance. You think yourself
omnipotent and you are.

Who can argue with ego
thick as a slab of gristle?

What great mind ever imagined
itself to be weak? Your words are

absolute cloud, then absolute art
Your penis half-monster, half-heart.

One never knows where
along the fault

the crack will come
only that it will come

One never knows
when pleasure begins and ends

only that it will begin
and it will end

But nothing can rob you of belief
and cheap shots on the street

are a dime a dozen. What can I
tell you about your face, so

changeable and so sturdy? It
cannot hide what you are.

Meanwhile you promise
new names for old things

the most cherished
lie of all.

New Year's Day

On New Year's Day I was a deaf-mute
walking down Tenth Street
poetry streaming down my cheeks.
Demons sat in dark stoops

their eyes flashing like raccoons.
I had been across the river and back.
It had been beautiful, tasted like honey
and cardamom, or pussy when pussy was pure.

It had been raunchy, seaweed crusted in salt.
It felt familiar, the dark meat of childhood.
It was useless, rags gone stiff
with dried blood, leeches, and salves.

We made a racket, squirrels trapped between
the walls, bobcats under the bathtub.
I watched your hands, then I watched
mine. Did they shake? Were they clumsy?

Were the lifelines severed?
Was it palsy? Choke me, you said.
Then you said, don't choke me
with my necklace. Use your bare hands.

There's a difference, I admit it.
Imagine me now, on the boat, black-eyed.
I am watching my superstition
surpassed by your religion.

Not Sisters

You used to get sloppy
gregarious and pigeon-toed
Even seltzer & lime
could start a confession

Now when you and her get drunk
you take it home. Like small
adults with pencils and guitars
you cook up salt from scratch

You and I are not sisters and
we never made anything together
Your poems always sound great
but I don't know what they mean

Back in the day I drank more
than any girl I knew except you
One night as we slept
your lamp fell on my head

It wasn't until morning
that I noticed the wound I had achieved
Sometimes my poems sound funny
but I say what I mean

like I'll miss you when you move to Kentucky

Anywhere but here

Last night I saw monsters stir in eyes
that look but don't see my heart
sunken with no treasure and no

survivors just a wreck a big bed
Dawn creaks in tornado weather morning
Sky gone yellow sour with summer

On the stoop sits a man with
a whore in a purple halter top
Neither is you as I feared but still

I'll never sleep again. There are
several kinds of brutality. One kind
involves coiling someone up beside you

to crack her skull in closed quarters.
I know now how to stick my thumb
in the hole you put in my bedroom door

and use the other four to stop up
the rest of the holes this love made
A breathtaking flow of damage

How do you experience your heart?
Scarlett could square her shoulders
but in the end she loses Rhett. Did he

ever hit her? Or did he not give a damn
and what's the difference? Dried injun heart
stamped thin still sticky on the inside

Every time I close my eyes I see
the skeleton of a flower
that has known and loved the sun
but chosen otherwise.

Engrams

I.
when the alarm sounds
it will be seven-thirty
my hand will make a fist
dive into stockings
black ones and walk away
from here with shoulders

II.
what hauntings now, grown thing?
a baby girl on mama's hip, hey jude 1968
a woman in slippers humming mud, 1975
nothing is as strong as your baby hair

III.
a strolling fear of one's own hands
romance of time killed on a wooden bench
the way one cheek prompts love
the other, nausea

IV.
when memory comes back
it has more tentacles
each more terrible
it whispers: this child
looks just like the last

V.
Use examples. Violinist, tiny house,
coat. Letting yourself freeze to death,
letting your friend have the coat.
If you allow him to use your kidneys
it is due to kindness on your part

VII.
I cut off your ears and held them
in my palms like trembling kittens.
Do you want to come home with me? I asked
forgetting, of course, you could not hear

VIII.
charred bones full of pores
chunks of glue from the skull
fragments of a father, that's why
my drawers are secret, silly

IX.
we hold back the facts the other
wants to know out of instinct, not malice.
where is the bottom of jealousy?
in polaroids? in letters? looking straight
into the street lamp, you compose dissonance

X.
her past was a house, she asked
if you wanted to visit it. you drove
through pennsylvania snow to find it
but the new owner wouldn't let you in

XI.
or perhaps I will stay in bed
let breakfast come as it will
as a wafer or a wedge of orange
simply recline into your history
stop fighting with teeth

XII.
boil me down to one decision
that's right, out will come a child
much like a flame

XIII.
Loss is absolute torture and though I know
there are those who have found great beauty
in it, I feel only envy, and perhaps hate

XIV.
in the semi-darkness of cellar
he was not concerned with weather
he did not stutter, and she let him
be wretched, her heart, as it were
molasses

XV.
learning how to fly or dreaming it
resting my chin on your curls
oh how we forgot to cut them, tiny child

November

I don't want anyone to look
at me today. The way I look,
it's personal. I cry all the way
to Canada. I don't know why.

The blank faces of silos,
white birches standing in swamps,
fields of cement tubing, the bus
lurching through the afternoon.

I do not want to compel you
nor do I find you compelling.
I want it to be Tuesday.
I want it to be raining.

None of this is seduction. I am
no longer the girl who went
from rooftops to rooms smearing
her blood on the walls. I no

longer jump on a thumb. I can
feed off of few words
the feel of a hot hip-bone,
the tawny and cold November weeds.

I know one day we will return
to watch the carnival from the hill.
We will share our whiskey,
dream of privacy.

Prayer

Tonight, grace.
Still a body, nothing
to hide or deny.

Unwittingly, devastated.
Not a field of snow
nor two stolen thumbs

Just the real thing
the dry pulse of the heart
the rupture of membrane.

I'm not sorry. I wouldn't
change a thing. We live
in the past, it's perfect.

We can no more be driven
wild. Children everywhere,
encouraging flowers. Only

night is ruin. It must be
worth something. Check up
on me sometime. Deserve this.

I'm not fit nor do I desire
a new life. The old one
does fine, tends fire.

Cynthia Nelson

paper

ok in case of new pen
rejected purple put out first
lethargy i wrote on the table
chose green & watched the ramblers
blowing down the street like
paper. i am one too, looming
over philip dick novel
having breakfast with old men
crazy in the head
& i'm out of mine, hanging
a head & a half over you
leaving, since i was looking
at your pictures, sleeping
in your singles, your dialect
catching, i am fast, this is #1
chronicle, you left five minutes ago,
i have taken a pill to kill, water slides
down my throat, naked makes the man,
too much food too soon, there's a lot
of food here, people are speaking german,
& i'd rather eat paper, or walk thru the blustery
warm from your clear eyes, still stumbling &
trembling on some level. but i love
being here alone, my back to the
village, eating eggs inside out, soaking in
butter, in this morning of slippery thighs
& there's a guy in a frilly pink sweater
giving candy to the waitress
which is nice, but i've no you
& am out of paper

cold as it was

the ice cube trays were
thrown about the freezer
emptied last night and tossed
in the drunken search
for more
cold as it was
and yes! at last a desk
by the window
in an empty house
protection from the elements
and what can i say
about the picture on the wall?
the photograph of the girl
beside her i would fade
without meal or toast i would fade
and i can't rough her up like i'm used to
can't play fucked-upness
can't spread germs
for she is so pretty!
and all i didn't know
true wealth true hurt
strum and punch
it's a new thing it's a girl
it's a girl i said no reason to cry
why the tears
this being the best place
to sit and think about it
i think about frozen limbs
and calm myself, legs spread on the bed

thinking hatch! come out and play!
pouring drinks through a chain link fence
a piece of one i stole from the freeway

how-to, 1415 goddard avenue

wash the rocks, title the songs
hide in corners at parties, two-fisted
practice drums in hot weather
with spice racks rattling
graduate to chimneys
with copper stars on them
watch girls from 2 cars away
hiding behind a porch post waiting

cardboard moving boxes soaked with rain
waterlogged cardboard & cigarette butts
avocado-colored ice cream maker
plastic table stained with stain
baby books of women in their 20s
dizzying confessions out of sight of nightly air

awake excited, pitchy
the coffee-maker gurgles
stuff pennies, make jokes
speak loudly, hear sirens
spin the fan, slip the sun
double solitaire

kids kick each others' bike tires
sparkling in their best suits on sundays
oversized moths kiss light bulbs & are fickle

an empty parking lot
so big it's impossible to fill

graveyards overflow
with the young & dead
a toolshed blocks your view
of full foliage
yet prevents an avalanche of tools

get your words out on paper
let the flies seal the fates
fail to own a swatter

crickets in the basement
tiny washer & dryer
moth balls in the vacuum cures fleas
your room smells like a coat
worn all winter
& the lining's falling out
honeysuckle lining

deciduous branches cover spat-out apples
the seeds won't take unless
you prepare the soil

take a peek at the neighbors
make mistakes you will want to repeat

#4 letter to m.

things i left at my dad's house a while ago: globe, jr. high stereo, shells from ecuadorean beaches, pick-up sticks, a trunk full of baby dresses, trinkets small, and the janet jackson rhythm nation flip book. i wish i could make paragraphs like you or more i wish i could be with you. i am wearing black jeans sans underwear and my sister's answer to the leaf green t. i talked to you and i understand sadness. you are too intuitive sometimes you pisces, knowing. knowing me before i do, before i can admit i have hangups, hangups. my sister washed her lab coat and it hangs on the closet door as a wearable testament to job life. sometimes i want to be regular and aggressive.

mom's can't wait 5 minutes
love can't wait 5 days

i tell you the things i remember. i tell you about soup, long drives in cars, the bay area shuffle, hippies gathered thickly. they were obstructing sidewalk traffic, it was clear they didn't care. i felt conservative for caring.

i can walk into any old room as long as i don't have to talk. i usually do talk but i don't like feeling myself looking.

a single mattress for awhile, a puffy blue comforter that's unfamiliar. drawers filled with envelopes, cabinets with salad spices. phoenix sounds cool, but it's just rocks and grandparents. somebody's got to be the blonde in denim, the hot hippie sipping pepsi in the sun. why not you. why not take the wings of this heart and scar the feathers, death to a butterfly.

windy
(jeff's dream)

you & i were on the space shuttle
& lee majors was driving it
with ozzy osbourne
they were driving it
i was eating this salad
& they said spit it out tpleah!
just like that they said spit it out tpleah
so i went tpleah!
i wasn't supposed to be eating it
because it was there before takeoff
i think it was lee majors' girlfriend's
she was polish & she didn't
speak any english
& he kept saying just be nice to her
don't be scared of her, just be nice
& smile a lot

we went outside the space shuttle
without any space suits
it was just really windy
W I N D Y

new orleans bound

genders dismay her
she doesn't want me to clam up
she takes puffs from her palm
marked innocence rising hard

we are a sequence
of events and rents
turned into silos
she creates with pens

her neck is tasteful
circled with beads and anemones
taking notice of her i spill
on myself juice she brought me

she is not accepting my airborne kisses
frankly she is not sucking on their hollow ovals
not noticing 'til she hears the ringing in my floor
it's moonshine

a pencil might satisfy the tiny miner
in and out of louisiana she will soon go
and sometimes, i will notice her calling out
names that sound like mine

all the time

i was young
i wanted to do it
19-year-old face-out
i'd rather not wait
play guitar perhaps, yes
i forget the song
but it sounded pretty great
i went to the bathroom
& came back wanting to play
he was trying to flash his dick
covering my eyes i started saying
that woman right in front of me
he's like women are raped
all the time you know
like i don't know i screamed
that shut him up
he was trying to help
meanwhile she is
crying in a lot somewhere
after the movie of them
fucking on the mast head
where he fails to fall to his death

letter from grand rapids, michigan
(found poem)

have you ever smelled a duck
they smell warm & sleepy
like corn just starting to rot

so i dumped that guy, it was
cruel & unusual, but he just
could not understand why i would want to wear

an ape mask
on the george washington bridge
on a monday at rush hour

i am searching for a man
who would not care why i would want to wear
an ape mask, etc.

meanwhile there is always tea
earl grey mostly

#12 letter to m.

how blessed your mail
of today took me by
oh yes. pretty spring day
and some vague distress
outside my door involving
police & schoolgirls
your xerox is a treasure
up on the wall it goes
as i have no more rules
no more feelings to hurt
the blue cars dispersed
& my curtains got closed
i cannot see the sun
& my interest in him deepens
i can't stand him being away
but i do & am composing
poems at the risk of
being obvious or he
might not care but it is
spring in new york & you've
got to have a place to go or
a real system of dreaming
i am glad the artists
are doing it what if they
weren't. with no place to
put my caresses
temporarily i find it
difficult not to imagine
them & feel really bad

it is both fresh
& far away i mean
if it had to say
i mean yeah there are
a lot of stories
a lot of beer evenings
& reckonings with time
i wrote the anti-pornography
letter & was still sober
because just being
with someone who
sees things differently
i'm allowed to be young
again. i'm not thirty anymore
i'm thirteen. & so i'll be sad
when he is gone for good
& when you are not on
the same coast as me
i still adore your creamy
frankness & devotion
hope the best for you
the sweetness you deserve
tell hugh play nice
romp in graveyards when you can
think of me when appropriate
give me secrets
& i'll give you more
when the time comes

upon reading back over past old things

I.
the diction was different, and the lingo
we were underprepared for separation
its difficulties we now understand
your careful markings and illegible script
make me amazed that our kisses
could show up on pages
between the brown tape binding
you must have invented
the way you treat me as well

i assimilate your vision so easily
and stay trim by running
to the post office to mail you things
declaring what lore is worthy of sharing
with you, my big girl love

you always said "craft a life"
then elsewhere mentioned how not to

with these moments preserved
we dive headlong into new ones
together october 8 til march 21 minus
christmas, now we're apart and i have
fantasies of you again, curled up in closets
or vans, in kick drums or la-z-boys
hard up for drink tickets or a sugar
mama me. there's always miss indiana though
and ain't she a peach. she might buy you a house

where i could live too, sometimes, to be within reach

now as ancient as i am compared to
criers and high school students i look hard
to find our history in our very own documents
as you who promises to be my longest lover ever
stays stranded in or branded by
your hometown where i understand
you have begun to find your way back after the winter
begun to thread torn pieces back together
in the riverboat town where you lay and lie beside
dead people, and ones alive

II.
yeah and i watch you
reaching for what you need
finding harnesses and leashes
being also beyond me
the hardy fingers
on skinny strings
needing no help

in the march it is barely may
in the april it's your hardest hopes
some sublime subliminal grapple
of your own kind three years shiny

earth
where they don't let you peel your own oranges
where catastrophic occurrences
cause blue rice and tear-stained landscapes

growing grass around a gravestone

painting pictures at home is heavenly
the unsettledness allows you to be yourself
and the loneliness is what we're born with

i write you in kentucky from new york

easy

"we have yet to really freak out" i said
licking butter off his face
the strawberry pancakes he made
i was too hungry to help eat i cooked in
the sense of made coffee i as too hungry to
help cook i ate coffee. i leaned out the
window staring at the pigeon's face & on
that level of hunger noted
dizziness & syrup & noted why i was leaning
out the window & wondered whether i would
grow up ever if on the level of leaning out the
window of the fifth floor fourth floor third
floor where lately i like to pretend i am
living lately sleeping on the floor

i am ready to give
up & so find syrup so
easy to lick
off his face like this
pastry kind of life is

i am a girl and had liked girl
that time & felt it easy
to explain she had
decrepit wisdom artist hands
she was full
as well to the brim
i liked a carrot
in my salad she did not

like a carrot in her salad she said
it's how she was raised
something sweet
& round in there she said
she did not like

this time licking butter
off his face the straw-
berry pancakes he made
deep in the snake of sleep
my rotating ankles finally
told him some truths
that i was too hungry to speak

"we have yet to truly go crazy"
as we watch the
strange & violent man
with no shirt on grab
his crotch in front of
the cops
"he would be hard
to arrest" he says
i say i know & am
ready to be missing
& am ready to be
easy to
explain

next time i won't know better either

permission to flirt, soap bubbles, pieces of pain i rub on buildings. journey songs, orange lipsticks and sweaters, sarah michaels, rachel hanes. irritability, sandalwood oil, vanilla oil, maggie's neck. cold air and loathing, warm clothes, a let down, her getting her way. dinner on maroon sheets, knowing better, redrawing the map. bugs that crawl out when you shift the rock, holes poked in vitamin capsules with safety pins, pretty purple dress on the day i stayed in. matchsticks, patience, the world outside, half-assed attempts at cultivating genius. she likes the word thigh, she has an idea, she likes the words i crossed out. wine and whiskey hangovers, the details i remember, what i really think, a friend of a friend, a fuck on the side, lack of light bulbs, lack of dust pan, survival skills, the crawling walls, keys thrown out windows in socks, tales of souls, lives down tubes, getting thrown out a place, fear of the future, ex-girlfriends (can't shoot 'em). they're in love in a sick kind of way, i do not know anyone who isn't in love in a sick kind of way, a bug on the table, a song i would sing, what we went through together
when we were happy, not when we weren't,
or not when we weren't
paying attention.

like a carrot in her salad she said
it's how she was raised
something sweet
& round in there she said
she did not like

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love in a sick kind of way, a bug on the table, a song i
would sing, what we went through together
when we were happy, not when we weren't,
or not when we weren't
paying attention.

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Not Sisters

Maggie Nelson & Cynthia Nelson

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